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Against the Beitzian consensus: why international political theory is not beyond realist skepticism

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Abstract

Widespread agreement exists among international political theorists that realist skepticism - a once-dominant philosophical doctrine that disputes the relevance of moral principles for international conduct - has been discredited. Charles Beitz (1999[1979]) and, in his wake, Marshall Cohen (1984) have been praised for having proven realist skepticism wrong and thereby having paved the way for the emergence and philosophical supremacy of normative international political theory. The present article argues that realist skepticism has not been successfully refuted, but is still a viable position. The argument is twofold. First, realist skepticism should be understood as a position that rejects the idea that international relations is a domain suitable for 'ethical discourse' (Gustafson 1988), that is, philosophically precise, technical ethical reasoning. Second, the above-mentioned attempt to refute realist skepticism fails for question-beggingly assuming the appropriateness of 'ethical discourse' and thereby for insufficiently addressing realism's key political objections. The upshot is that normative, ethical international political theory, its popularity notwithstanding, rests on an insecure foundation.

Keywords: international ethics; international political theory; international skepticism; political realism

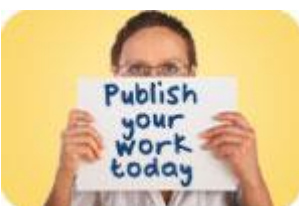
Article body

Introduction

Since the 1970s, academic reflection on morality in international relations has been dominated by 'normative international political theory', in all its varieties a growth industry that has replaced the earlier dominant, political realist 'international skepticism'. While realist skepticism held that states as the core actors in an insecure world cannot attach real importance to moral principles for international behavior, the now-prevailing philosophical view is that concepts such as 'rights' and 'justice' can play a key role outside as well as inside supposedly 'sovereign' political communities (Brown 2002: 1-14; cf. 2013; 2015). In fact, Charles Beitz (1999[1979]) and, in his wake, Marshall Cohen (1984) are widely regarded to have dealt a deadly blow to the skepticism present in the writings of twentieth-century realists such as Hans Morgenthau and George Kennan and their predecessors Machiavelli and Hobbes (Shue 1982; Dower 1998: 27-48; Nye 1986: 6-10; Buchanan 1999: 77-79; Van den Anker 2000: 10; Welch 2000: 114; Brown 2005: 374-375; Churchill 2011: 64; cf. Beitz 2005: 423). Today, realist skepticism is considered 'an easy target for political theorists' (Bell 2010: 94), as '[t]he realists...often fail to give rigorous arguments in favor of their views and sometimes even appear muddled in their thinking' (Buchanan 1999: 77). As Beitz already concluded more than a quarter of a century ago: 'Theorists have had little difficulty in showing that the realists' scepticism rests on an implausibly shallow conception of morality...; indeed, perhaps it is not too soon to observe that this particular battle has largely been won' (1988: 202).

International political theorists have welcomed this development, stressing that poverty, inequality, human rights violations, climate change, and the need for global cooperation on such issues require clear and precise principles and norms that can guide political choices and offer standards of legitimacy for international institutions (cf. Beitz 1999: 4-5, 216). That a remaining skeptic such as (neo)realist John Mearsheimer (2001: 23-27) claims that states are - and even should be - driven by balance-of-power considerations is, then, something to be deplored as well as rejected. International political theory may still applaud realism's warning against legalistic-moralistic approaches in foreign policy (Beitz 1999: 187-191;

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1988: 202-203; cf. Cohen 1984: 302-305; Bell 2010: 99-103), but it should ignore its skepticism entirely and focus on global justice fully (cf. Gilabert 2012; Risse 2012).

But is realist skepticism really dead? Renowned liberal political theorist John Rawls (1999) appears unsure: he argues that 'states' are no moral actors, but without really disputing the realist belief that states are the major international actors. To be sure, Rawls (1999: 23-30, 34-35) himself moves from states to 'peoples' because he sees states as merely rationally striving to increase their own power and meet their own interests and, contrary to peoples with their moral qualities, as not reasonable. 'The idea of peoples rather than states...enables us to attribute moral motives - an allegiance to the principles of the Law of Peoples...- to peoples (as actors), which we cannot do for states,' Rawls (1999: 17) explains. To realist theory Rawls (1999: 46-48) responds that liberal peoples - which are 'satisfied' possess due self-respect, and equally respect all peoples - are not warlike. At most, they go to war with 'outlaw states' that violate human rights or behave aggressively (Rawls 1999: 80-81, 90). However, Rawls's international moral law thus cannot inherently apply to state actors outside the Society of Peoples, while it is uncertain that peoples actually exist, or will always exist. When doing 'ideal theory', Rawls leaves open the possibility of a non-ideal world consisting of states as the key actors. And when doing 'non-ideal theory', examining how the ideal of the Law of Peoples is to be achieved, Rawls merely builds on 'the assumption that there exist...some relatively well-ordered peoples' that proceed toward the ideal (Rawls 1999: 89). Insofar, then, as the world now or someday contains states that do not qualify as peoples, there would be no international moral duties of any meaning on Rawls's logic (cf. Kamminga 2015).

Moreover, a 'new political realism' has emerged recently, with possibly serious implications for international political theory in particular (Brown 2015: 212-214). This anti-utopian realism sees politics as an independent sphere subject to norms that arise from within politics itself. Such norms relate to power, legitimation, and the exercise of judgment as undetermined by moral principles. This position, then, aims to abandon (Rawlsian) liberalism without advocating political amorality or immorality (Galston 2010). But if such a realism could be plausible in case of domestic politics, it might make even more sense to maintain a 'no ethics' realist theory for international relations, which, after all, is politics under anarchy, that is, without central political authority. Chris Brown (2013: 218; cf. 2002: 184) notes that liberalism with its theories of justice moralizes international as well as domestic life by turning political and contested questions into issues of pure morality. If, then, liberal ethics could be particularly problematical for politics under anarchy, we should even ask if international political theory may still assume realist skepticism to be entirely overcome.

The present article, then, will dispute the view that international political theory may consider realist skepticism discredited. I argue that the 'victory' of normative international political theory is at best premature: realist skepticism has *not* been successfully refuted, but is still a viable intellectual position, that is, a position still to be taken seriously in debates about global justice (against Beitz 1999: 183, 214). My argument is twofold. First, realist skepticism is to be understood not as a necessarily amoral position, but as one that rejects the idea that foreign policy and international relations are domains suitable for what theologian-ethicist James Gustafson has called 'ethical discourse', that is, a type of moral discourse that stresses 'the technical aspects of ethics as a philosophical discipline' (1988: 273). Thus, asking 'What ought we to do?', ethical discourse 'refer[s] to...philosophically self-conscious and rigorous modes of moral argumentation...and requires precision in use of concepts, such as justice, rights, duties and ends' (Gustafson 1988: 270, 269). In the realist view, then, to demand morally 'rigorous arguments' (Buchanan) is precisely what is out of place in international relations. Second, the Beitzian attempt to refute realist skepticism fails for assuming, in a question-begging way, the appropriateness of 'ethical discourse' and thereby for not adequately addressing realism's key political concerns about the centrality of the state. While this article does not aim to comprehensively defend the political-theoretical superiority of realist skepticism but rather treats it, like Beitz does, as 'the perspective to beat', it does suggest that normative-ethical international political theory, its current popularity among philosophers notwithstanding, has a weak foundation.

One clarification is in order before I begin. Realists insist that, as world politics is anarchic and states are the key international actors, the first principle of international behavior is to 'follow the national interest' (Beitz 1999: 25). I agree with Beitz (1999: 24-25, 52) that 'national interest' should be understood in a restricted sense as basically referring to the state's self-preservation and its political and economic self-interest. What the national interest does not include are notions such as the global interest or the welfare of the global poor, since to include such larger moral values would make the concept lose its distinctiveness and analytical usefulness. Thus, again like Beitz, I reject Morgenthau's idea that the national interest could be enlarged to incorporate other-regarding values (Morgenthau 1982: 36-37).

Realist skepticism properly understood

The skepticism of post-war realists is often understood as a full denial of the meaningfulness of moral

considerations in international affairs following Machiavelli and Hobbes (Beitz 1999; 2005: 410; Cohen 1984; Dower 1998). Sometimes it is seen as non-existent, due to the argument that a realist such as Morgenthau was actually an ethical thinker albeit in a 'realist' way (Nye 1986; Murray 1997; Brown 2005). I shall argue that realism *is* skeptical but not necessarily in a fully amoral sense: the unifying feature is that all key realists, for all the differences among them, deny that international relations is a domain fit for systematic, precise, 'technical' ethical reflection. Thus, realist skepticism, while not always excluding a rather loose, more intuitive, policy-based morality, rejects the relevance of 'ethical discourse' (Gustafson). What characterizes the realist position is that the ethicist as a philosopher of 'rights' or 'justice' has nothing meaningful to say about international behavior. Ethical principles may apply to individuals, groups, and, possibly, domestic politics, but certainly not internationally. It is, then, in this specific, tighter sense that Beitz, Cohen, and others rightly see the realists discussed below as skeptics.

That the realist Kennan cannot see an important role for ethical discourse in international relations is not hard to show. In his well-known response to the concern of 'the younger generation' about the relationship between morality and foreign policy, Kennan (1985: 205) makes a sharp distinction between government and individual. As foreign policy agent, the former must take the necessity and 'therefore' amorality of the national interest as its guide:

'[T]he functions, commitments and moral obligations of governments are not the same as those of the individual. Government is an agent, not a principal. Its primary obligation is to the *interests* of the national society it represents...[which] are basically those of its military security, the integrity of its political life and the well-being of its people. These needs have no moral quality. They arise from the very existence of the national state in question and from the status of national sovereignty it enjoys. They are the unavoidable necessities of a national existence and therefore not subject to classification as either "good" or "bad." They may be questioned from a detached philosophic point of view. But the government of the sovereign state cannot make such judgments. When it accepts the responsibilities of governing, implicit in that acceptance is the assumption that it is right that the state should be sovereign, that the integrity of its political life should be assured, that its people should enjoy the blessings of military security, material prosperity and a reasonable opportunity for...the pursuit of happiness. For these assumptions the government needs no moral justification, nor need it accept any moral reproach for acting on the basis of them' (Kennan 1985: 205-206; emphasis in original).

Note that Kennan claims that philosophical ethics has nothing meaningful to add to the assessment of foreign policy as implemented by the government, since it may only offer outsider's criticism due to its 'detached' perspective. While, then, Kennan agrees that 'the environmental and nuclear crises will brook no delay', he insists that the 'need for giving priority to the averting of these two overriding dangers has a purely rational basis - a basis in national interest - quite aside from morality' (1985: 216).

Kennan's strict argument is shared by Felix Oppenheim (1987; 2002), who claims that rationality, not morality, is the basic standard for evaluating state leaders' conduct. National interest, Oppenheim (1987: 379) argues, is not a moral principle but a matter of rationality and thus not subject to direct moral assessment. Structural realist Kenneth Waltz also highlights the amoral inevitability of national interests, doing so by putting a particularly strong emphasis on the condition of international anarchy and the resulting possibility of war:

'Force is a means of achieving the external ends of states because there exists no consistent, reliable process of reconciling the conflicts of interest that inevitably arise among similar units in a condition of anarchy. A foreign policy based on this image is neither moral nor immoral, but embodies merely a reasoned response to the world about us' (Waltz 2001: 238; cf. 1979).

Waltz is cited by Beitz (1999: 35 n.49) in order to clarify how Hobbes - Beitz's main target in his attack of international skepticism - uses the government-less 'state of nature' analytically to give a 'third image', international anarchy account of the causes of war. Scholars today are divided about whether the standard view of Hobbes as a consistent realist skeptic, a view Beitz obviously shares, is actually correct (Murray 1997: 33-47; Boucher 1998; Hutchings 1999: 15-27; Newey 2010; Malcolm 2002: 432-456; Naticchia 2013: 243-244). This debate need not be resolved here. What matters is that Hobbes has been regarded by friends and enemies as a founding figure of an influential realist skeptical tradition. And doing so is reasonable from the perspective of Beitz's political-theoretical project of 'justice' (Beitz 1999), as Hobbes writes skeptically about sovereign-less justice (cf. Boucher 1998: 162-163; Hutchings 1999: 18-19; Nagel 2005: 114, 116):

'To this warre of every man against every man, this also is consequent; that nothing can be Unjust. The notions of Right and Wrong, Justice and Injustice have there no place. Where there is no common Power, there is no Law: where no Law, no Injustice...[B]efore the names of Just, and Unjust can have place, there must be some coercive Power, to compell men equally to the performance of their Covenants, by the terrour of some punishment, greater than the benefit they expect by the breach of their Covenant' (Hobbes

2012: 196, 220).

Machiavelli, surely an established realist, does not seem as obviously skeptical as the ones just presented, since he defends something like the moral standing of the national interest (Machiavelli 2003: 131-133, 291, 514-515; cf. Crick in Machiavelli 2003: 63-69; Machiavelli 2005: 53, 61; Galston 2010: 392). Nevertheless, for Machiavelli, the moral quality that the national interest possesses is one that an individualist ethics cannot grasp. To quote David Boucher:

'[There are not] any universal ethical standards by which states should direct their actions...The realm of politics, while guided in its ultimate end by moral considerations [the common good of the ruler's own state], cannot afford to be constrained by the ethics of the ordinary citizen' (Boucher 1998: 141).

Machiavelli, then, is to be seen as a skeptic for his clear political and anti-altruistic rejection of philosophical-ethical interference. That Morgenthau, too, is skeptical about the role of ethical discourse in international politics may need more explanation. Endorsing, like Machiavelli, the moral value of the national interest, Morgenthau defends the state's moral obligation of trusteeship as well as the moral principle of liberty:

'The individual may say for himself: "*Fiat justitia, pereat mundus...*," but the state has no right to say so in the name of those who are in its care. Both individual and state must judge political action by universal moral principles, such as that of liberty. Yet while the individual has a moral right to sacrifice himself in defense of such a moral principle, the state has no right to let its moral disapprobation of the infringement of liberty get in the way of successful political action, itself inspired by the moral principle of national survival. There can be no political morality without prudence; that is, without consideration of the political consequences of seemingly moral action. Realism, then, considers prudence...to be the supreme virtue in politics. Ethics in the abstract judges action by its conformity with the moral law; political ethics judges action by its political consequences' (Morgenthau 1978: 10-11; emphasis in original; cf. 1982: 33-39).

Conceivably, scholars have claimed that Morgenthau is no international skeptic (cf. Amstutz 2008: 48; Murray 1997). Thus, Joel Rosenthal (1991: 4-5) argues that Morgenthau's view that international politics is grounded in the national interest defined in terms of power - the primary guide to foreign policy - does not exclude moral considerations. Rosenthal (1991: 47-49) observes one moral component in realism: 'the responsible use of power' (cf. also Amstutz 2008: 60). The responsible state leader makes pragmatic choices without ignoring the moral dimension of her decisions. Rosenthal, then, attacks Cohen's (1984) characterization of realists as skeptics who stress a crude power politics: since responsible power use takes into account the 'ideal' realm of the ethical and the 'real' realm of the political, one should not understand the realists as arguing that 'the conduct of nations is, and should be, guided and judged exclusively by the amoral requirements of the national interest' (Cohen 1984: 300).

Yet, while Morgenthau's realism is not fully skeptical morally, as also his emphasis on 'political ethics' suggests (cf. Coll 1999),^[1] it is skeptical about the contribution of ethical discourse. Note first that the above Morgenthau quotation suggests that for the state 'national survival' is what should matter eventually, not 'liberty'. Note also that Rosenthal's account suggests that for Morgenthau morality takes a backseat to power and that a realist treatment of morality will be imprecise by philosophical-ethical standards. Indeed, as Morgenthau (1978) does insist on the role of power as the best vantage point from which to make political judgments, his realism cannot give room for more than a flexible, unstable, intuitive, policy-oriented morality in which national interest is primary and (altruistic) moral deliberation secondary (also against Caney 2005: 8). Most basically, Morgenthau puts an end to all doubt about his stance when offering a theoretically focused expression of realism's skepticism about ethical discourse by making a straightforward *intellectual* distinction between the discipline of politics and the discipline of ethics: practitioners of both have different tasks. It is in this sense that the realist must give total preference to power-based interest over abstract moral principles:

'Intellectually, the political realist maintains the autonomy of the political sphere, as the economist, the lawyer, the moralist maintain theirs. He thinks in terms of interest defined as power, as the economist thinks in terms of interest defined as wealth; the lawyer, of the conformity of action with legal rules; the moralist, of the conformity of action with moral principles' (Morgenthau 1978: 12).

Morgenthau, then, does not believe that originally non-political ethical theories may be productively applied to politics as a sphere typically dominated by power. In his view, in all politics an ethics of 'prudence' and 'consequences' should prevail (cf. also Ankersmit 1996: 13-15), not some 'ethics in the abstract'. As Morgenthau will acknowledge prudence to be a rather imprecise as well as inescapable concept (Coll 1999: 95-98), he will readily accept his morality not to meet technical-ethical standards. Crucially, Morgenthau appears to agree with Kennan, and the other realists discussed above, that whereas the philosophical 'moralist' may surely employ moral principles to evaluate foreign policies, such applications will be devoid of international - and, in Morgenthau's case, even domestic - political significance.

Although Beitz (1999) and Cohen (1984) wrongly think of realism as necessarily an amoral position, they rightly see it as skeptical about the contribution of ethical theory. Beitz is quite correct when noting that the 'leading realists...when they addressed themselves explicitly to the role of moral norms in practical judgment about foreign policy, they were consistently if not unanimously sceptical' (2005: 410). Thus, realism will be skeptical about normative international political theory as promoted by Beitz, Simon Caney, and others, because that now-dominant project draws mainly on ethical discourse as its mode of argumentation in order to establish the rights and obligations of national and international political institutions as well as those of individuals (Caney 2005: 2; Cohen 1984: 301-302, 310-311). Beitz reveals himself as an ethical discourse theorist by emphasizing 'the rights and interests of persons' as 'of fundamental importance from the moral point of view' and 'to [which] the justification of principles for international relations should appeal' (1999: 55, cf. 53, 58; cf. Kamminga 2007: 424).[2] As Beitz himself realizes, the realism he criticizes rejects any international perspective that assumes ethics as a philosophical discipline to provide the yardstick. At most, realists will accept the standard of what Gustafson calls 'policy discourse', which 'is written from the standpoint of responsible agents and not external observers' and thus 'assumes the position of responsibility within enabling and limiting conditions', emphasizes 'the assessment of power to affect change', and 'accepts conditions which from...ethical perspectives might be judged to be morally wrong' (1988: 270).

In short, for the realists, ethically developed principles of 'rights' and 'justice' make no sense in international relations, as states, the major international actors in their view, cannot be held to them for being primarily occupied with considerations of national interest and power. The conflict is clear: what realism denies and modern international political theory affirms is that international relations is a domain fit for ethical-theoretical reflection in search for clear principles that guide political choice.

A failed attempt to refute realist skepticism

I now argue that the Beitzian attempt to refute realist skepticism fails for assuming, in a question-begging way, the appropriateness of ethics as an academic discipline and thereby not seriously addressing the key political objections of realist skeptics.

What Beitz (1999: 11-66) argues is that realist skepticism, particularly the Hobbesian state of nature, fails empirically and theoretically. Thus, he aims to refute the two premises combined in the Hobbesian argument for skepticism: (1) the empirical claim that the international state of nature is a state of war, in which states have no supreme interest in following moral rules that restrain the pursuit of their more immediate interests; (2) the theoretical claim that moral principles must be justified by showing that following them promotes the long-range interests of each agent involved. According to Beitz (1999: 14), the first entails an empirically inaccurate view of the structure and dynamics of current international relations, and the second gives an ethically wrong account of the basis of moral principles and of the state's moral character. I will describe and criticize both arguments.

Beitz (1999: 35-50) argues against (1) that contemporary international relations does not meet any of the four state of nature criteria: (i) the international actors are states; (ii) states have relatively equal power; (iii) states can arrange their internal, non-security affairs independently of other actors' internal policies; and (iv) there are no reliable expectations of reciprocal compliance by actors with cooperation rules in the absence of a superior power capable of enforcing these rules. Thus, Beitz observes that our world: is a trans-nationalized one of multiple, sub-state, and super-state as well as state actors (against i); features states of varying levels of (retaliatory) capabilities (against ii); displays economic interdependence and international regimes (against iii); and resembles an international community that possesses a variety of devices for promoting compliance with established norms, with compliance as to a high extent voluntary and competition non-violent (against iv). The domain of international relations, Beitz concludes, actually occupies a middle ground between the state of nature and domestic society.

But this argument of Beitz is dubious in various ways. First, it seems largely dependent on a pluralist, or neoliberal, worldview - or, alternatively, on an English School 'international society' view (Dower 1998: 35-36); this makes it debatable from the perspective of other worldviews and invites the realist response that the gap between model and observation is of minor significance and does not eliminate the probative value of the Hobbesian analogy ('Editor' 1980: 834-835). Second, the argument cannot be but insecure, because an international state of nature-like situation could still exist and might exist someday, as Beitz (1999: 59) acknowledges. The empirical possibility of a Hobbesian international situation makes ethical international political theory dependent on a rather 'lucky fact' about the global empirical situation. As Boucher notes, Hobbes underlined this point himself:

'Hobbes did believe in progress in the relations between states - the move away from plundering and pirating, for example, constituted an improvement - but as in the relations between individuals and

between communities, there is always the danger of reverting to a condition of hostility. Without a common power, of course, states are more likely to revert to a condition of war' (Boucher 1998: 162).

Third, Beitz's empirical argument, even if successful on its own terms, cannot be good enough to exchange realist skepticism for ethical international political theory. Indeed, such an empirical argument remains compatible with the normative claim that states (through their leaders) should act in their own interest as the key standard for evaluating their conduct.

Most basic to Beitz's anti-skepticism is (2): the theoretical Hobbesian claim that the key concept for the justification of moral principles is self-interest (Beitz 1999: 50-63). Thus, principles for domestic or international justice must be justified, respectively, by considerations of individual or national self-interest. Beitz, then, explains that an adequate assessment of the Hobbesian theory, applied to international relations, requires an examination of two questions: 'First, should the justification of principles for international relations appeal ultimately to considerations about states (e.g., whether general acceptance of a principle would promote each *state's* interests)? Second, should the justification of such principles appeal only to *interests*?' (1999: 51; emphases in original). As regards the first question, Beitz argues that the analogy between states and persons is faulty:

'By analogy with the interpersonal case, the argument for following the national interest when it conflicts with moral rules would be that there is a *national* right of self-preservation [analogous to a personal one] which states cannot be required to give up. The difficulty is that it is not clear what such a right involves or how it can be justified. States are more than aggregates of persons; at a minimum, they are characterized by territorial boundaries and a structure of political and economic institutions' (Beitz 1999: 52; emphasis in original).

Beitz (1999: 52-53) grants that, insofar as national self-preservation preserves the lives of the state's citizens, it seems acceptable for being directly based on its individual members' self-preservation rights. But he objects that the alleged right is less acceptable when it is the state's territorial integrity or government that is at risk, because individual lives are not necessarily threatened then. Therefore, 'if we wish to prescribe principles to guide the behavior of states,...our justification of normative principles must appeal ultimately to those kinds of considerations that are appropriate in a prescriptive context, namely the rights and interests of persons' (Beitz 1999: 53; emphasis omitted). Thus, Morgenthau's 'moral principle of national survival' (which I quoted earlier) is ambiguous, since 'national survival' may include, say, economic or cultural interests and thereby extend beyond the survival of the state's citizens (Beitz 1999: 54-55). Beitz, then, concludes: 'regarding foreign policy choices, it would seem preferable to dispense with the idea of the national interest altogether and instead appeal directly to the rights and interests of all persons affected by the choice' (1999: 55; cf. Cohen 1984: 324). The ultimate reason for Beitz to draw this conclusion is indeed the ethical discourse statement quoted earlier: 'It is the rights and interests of persons that are of fundamental importance from the moral point of view, and it is to these considerations that the justification of principles for international relations should appeal' (1999: 55). And to clarify 'the moral point of view' is the concern of the second question he has distinguished.

Regarding that second issue, Beitz (1999: 56-58) argues that the view of ethics as based on enlightened self-interest is wrong, since it ignores principles that intuitively impose requirements on our actions regardless of considerations of self-benefit. Also, on the basis of self-interest it seems impossible to justify compliance with rules that govern participation in institutions due to the free-rider problem. To quote Beitz on the nature of ethics:

'To assert that ethics is possible is to say that there are occasions when we have reason to override the demands of self-interest by taking a moral point of view toward human affairs. Speaking very roughly, the moral point of view requires us to regard the world from the perspective of one person among many rather than from that of a particular self with particular interests, and to choose courses of action, policies, rules, and institutions on grounds that would be acceptable to any agent who was impartial among the competing interests involved...[O]ne [then] views one's interests as one set of interests among many and weighs the entire range of interests according to some impartial scheme...[O]nly the moral perspective... may move us to act even when there is no assurance of reciprocal compliance, and hence no self-interested justification, available' (Beitz 1999: 58).

In sum, Beitz's argument against Hobbesian and realist skepticism entails that the rights and interests of persons should be taken as fundamental from the moral viewpoint that commands the impartial consideration of all interests involved (cf. also Amstutz 2008: 8), and that principles for international relations should be justified by directly appealing to these ethical considerations. Thus, he concludes that 'the moral point of view is not irrelevant to [international] political theory' (Beitz 1999: 58). What I will not dispute is Beitz's (liberal) view of 'ethics' and 'the moral point of view' as such. What I will dispute is Beitz's reliance on these concepts in his attempt to refute realist skepticism by aiming to show their immediate relevance for international conduct.

Beitz's analysis suffers from a serious, question-begging neglect of the realist objection against including the discipline of ethics in reasoning about international conduct. The core problem is that Beitz simply assumes the appropriateness of ethical discourse as the key to international (as well as domestic) political theory that should clarify by what principles political choices should be guided (1999: 5, cf. 191). Indeed, he offers no independent defense for the very relevance of reasoning grounded in the moral point of view of an originally individualist ethics (Beitz 1999: 55-58, 62-63) for the behavior of international actors, notably states with their governments, under anarchy. Such a relevance cannot be taken as self-evident, because what realists are typically skeptical about, as we have seen, is the idea that *states* could, let alone should, follow ethically developed, technically precise principles. Thus, in order to refute realist skepticism, Beitz should have demonstrated, not assumed, that *states* (or their governments) are able to 'regard the world from the perspective of one person among many', 'to choose courses of action, policies, rules, and institutions on grounds that would be acceptable to any agent who was impartial among the competing interests involved', and to '[view] one's interests as one set of interests among many and [weigh] the entire range of interests according to some impartial scheme'.

Presumably, Beitz would reply that there is no problem worth examining, as he writes:

'To say that the (prescriptive) international state of nature is made up of persons rather than states (or their representatives) is not to eliminate states from the purview of international theory. My claim here is that principles must be *justified* by considerations of individual rather than "national" rights. But there is no theoretical difficulty in holding that such principles still *apply* primarily to states' (Beitz 1999: 54, n.89; emphases in original).

However, this passage falls short. In merely suggesting that implementation of ethically established international principles is something that mainly states (rather than, say, a world state) may be responsible for, Beitz is unconvincing for overlooking that realist skeptics do see a theoretically relevant 'difficulty': ethics is a wrong place to start for designing principles of conduct for governments that represent states - the dominant international actors - and simply exist to use their power to protect national interests. Strange also is that Beitz suggests that states could still be most responsible for carrying out ethically justified principles - again, exactly the problem for realists - whereas, as we have seen, his anti-skepticism on the (empirical) level of international political economy as well as on the (theoretical) level of ethics is state-opposed. It is puzzling, if not incoherent, that Beitz (1999: 143-176, 215-216) regularly appeals to states as realistically the main actors to put moral obligations into practice (or to promote just transnational institutions) after having tried to demonstrate that they are not the undeniably key actors in world politics.

Importantly, the problem is a deep flaw and therefore difficult, if at all, to eliminate: as regards 'justification' as well as 'application' of moral principles, Beitz actually argues from the perspective of the 'detached' (Kennan), or 'abstract' (Morgenthau), philosophical outsider without addressing, let alone refuting, the realist 'insider' perspective. It is not as self-evident as Beitz thinks that *states* as collectivities have the capacity to act by justifying their conduct on basic ethical, that is, impartial rather than self-interested, grounds.[3] Thus, to argue, even if correctly, that Morgenthau's 'moral principle of national survival' - loose and intuitive as it surely sounds (cf. also Murray 1997: 89-92) - is inadequate *ethically* is inconclusive; the hard task would be to show *either* that Morgenthau's principle is inappropriate *within* a realist 'political ethics' of prudentially weighing consequences *or* that such a realist political ethics *as such* must fail. Accordingly, Beitz's ethics-based argument against Hobbesian skepticism that the interests of persons are basic and agents may have to set aside their self-interests because of moral requirements such as fairness misses the target: the realist emphasis on at most 'moral principles derived from political reality' (Morgenthau 1982: 33). As for now, the realist can maintain that Beitz strives for moral over-accuracy in international political theory, as his abstract ethics implies the abolishment of states with their 'partial' governments. Like his empirical argument, then, Beitz's most important, theoretical argument does not work.

Although his rejection of realist skepticism enjoys a status of *locus classicus*, it is worth stressing that Beitz is not the only normative international political theorist to bypass the skeptics' key point. Thus, Caney (2005: 137-141, cf. 276) argues against the realist view of states as against cosmopolitan principles that: (i) global schemes of distributive justice, such as debt cancellation or a Tobin tax on international currency speculation, are not unworkable and utopian; and (ii) it is wrong to believe that, because states have a duty to pursue the national interest due to their special relationship with their citizens - a view for which a strong common sense intuition does exist - they have no obligation to comply with cosmopolitan justice; states can only 'pursue their ends within the context of a fair overall framework', and thus '[t]heir duty to their citizens applies within a set of parameters defined by a theory of justice' (2005: 140; emphasis omitted). But Caney's argumentation, too, fails to refute realist skepticism. As regards (i), this argument's tenability is at least dependent on the actual requirements of global justice: the more demanding these are, the more states cannot but ignore them because of their strive for survival under anarchy, realists

have reason to insist. And as regards (ii), the most basic and so most relevant argument of the two, this argument fails to establish why a just overall framework would apply to the behavior of states operating in a context of anarchy in which: no such fairness framework exists; there is no guarantee that this framework will actually be maintained if it did exist; and states cannot be expected to create such a framework if only because of their intuitively acceptable domestic concerns (which Caney himself also acknowledges; cf. Kamminga 2015). Thus, this rather question-begging argument ignores realism's skepticism about the very relevance of an abstract (cosmopolitan) ethics in an environment dominated by states that cannot accept more than a modest 'policy discourse' (Gustafson) of responsibility, limited possibilities, and risk-avoidance.

In short, the realist view that ethically developed principles of 'rights' and 'justice' must be ruled out in foreign policy (or 'the ethics of statesmanship'; Beitz 1999: 188) and international relations has not been convincingly refuted. It is still not clear that realists should abandon their skepticism about treating international politics as a 'department of ethics', or a 'clear and transparent world of moral argument' (cf. Ankersmit 1996: 10, 15). It remains reasonable to argue that states remain very important actors in international politics, with no feasible successor in sight (Waltz 1979, 2001; Mearsheimer 2001; Morgenthau 1978; cf. Brown 2015: 73), and that they cannot be expected to act according to philosophical-ethical principles. Indeed, the Beitz-initiated project of normative international political theory in which the relevance of principles of global justice is heavily stressed (cf. also Beitz 1999: 216) seems meant for a world devoid of states as powerful actors. A consistently 'outside' critic, Beitz (1999: 58, 81; cf. 2005: 423) has merely assumed the political relevance of a liberal ethics of individual autonomy (Welch 2000: 114-115; cf. Brown 2005: 376) - even from the very beginning (cf. Beitz 1983: 595; Brown 2002: 173; 2013: 206).

Conclusion

As long as international political theorists have not truly refuted the state-centric assumptions of realism, they should not regard its skepticism as obsolete and the battle with it as over. If my argument has been correct, the consequences for international political theory would be serious. As Beitz (1999: 13, 65) himself states, the very possibility of normative international political theory depends upon the incorrectness of realist skepticism (cf. Brown 2005: 374). But since it is still questionable that international political theory can leave the realist moral maximum of a 'muddled' (Buchanan) policy discourse behind, the ethical project that Beitz has kicked off to make international political theory more practically relevant for today's world lacks a secure foundation. It may even be a project of diluted political relevance, as practical triviality in a world of states could be the price to pay for theoretical precision.

Since normative international political theorists are rightly concerned about the injustice of the world we live in (cf. Nagel 2005: 113) and Kennan's (earlier quoted) acceptance of the urgent need to tackle 'the environmental and nuclear crises' is rationalistic rather than moral, this article does not advocate the moral superiority of realist skepticism. Yet realist skepticism might be seen in a rather positive light. What it implies is that philosophical ethics should be treated with care and, for that reason, not be contaminated with international (and perhaps even domestic) politics, that is, not be subjected to the collective egoistic forces of the state-centered, power-dominated world of international relations. Seen as such, the realists' ultimate concern is that we keep the discipline of ethics safe from (international) political misuse. Realist skepticism may be said to have this moral justification: we should not make global politics more beautiful than it really is.

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Notes

[1] Morgenthau's realism does not need to exclude humanitarian intervention once, and as long as, the state's survival is maintained (against Buchanan 1999).

[2] Realists will be deeply skeptical about Beitz's plea for a global application of an egalitarian principle of distributive justice, such as Rawls's difference principle (Beitz 1999). Likewise, they will dismiss the relevance of Caney's four principles of global distributive justice: (i) persons have a right to subsistence; (ii) persons of different nations should have equal opportunities; (iii) persons have the right to equal pay for equal work; and (iv) benefiting persons matters more the worse off they are (Caney 2005: 122-124).

[3] Realists could also invoke against Beitz the argument of the relative immorality of state-level collectivities (compared to individual persons) as developed by Reinhold Niebuhr, a thinker they often regard as an intellectual father but who is completely ignored by Beitz (cf. Kamminga 2012, 2015).

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